



Personality goes a long way

By Tara Kaprowy
Staff Writer

— While driving home from Cincinnati a month ago, I came upon an interesting little message. Spanning across the southbound lanes was one of those black, overhead signs that will often warn of upcoming accidents and, thus, traffic snarls. But this time, instead of telling me to expect delays, it said this: “Not wearing your helmet? Sign your organ donor card.”

I laughed out loud when I read it. Someone at the Transportation Cabinet had decided to call a spade a spade and, frankly, it was refreshing. And not only was the message a little sassy, it was actually pretty clever. It made you think about helmets, it made you think about organ donation and suggested the relationship between the two

A few weeks later, this time driving home from Lexington, I saw another of the messages. This one read: “Arriving safely by using your seat belt? Priceless.”

Again, I was impressed by the personality of the communication. This message had obviously been written by a real person, rather than some automaton whose only words of advice were “Buckle up Kentucky.”

So I decided to find out who the author was.

It didn’t take me long to find Mark Stapleton, a retired Kentucky State Police trooper who is now the director of Transportation Cabinet security. Stapleton’s been coming up with the messages for about six months now, which appear on about 40 of the boards across the state. If the boards aren’t needed for a more urgent matter (like an accident up ahead), the messages will appear on them over the weekends.

The notes I saw on the boards were just two of Stapleton’s pearls of wisdom. Others include: “A wrinkled shirt is better than a smashed face,” “Buckle up your child. Their life may depend on it,” “Show a little restraint. Buckle up,” and “You can’t see the fireworks from a jail cell. Don’t drink and drive,” which was written specifically for July 4.

Halloween got a special one too: “Scared to use seat belts? The results can be frightening.”

Stapleton’s goal is to use the handwritten messages to get people’s attention.

“If it changes one person or 10 people then, to me, that’s enough,” he said.

It’s something he’s willing to take flack for. Stapleton told me some motorcyclists have complained about the organ donation message and he admitted it was a bit graphic.

But, the way I see it, he has people talking.

And when it comes to changing mindless habits, you need a bit of a shock to get you jump-started.

When I was in high school, all of us Manitoba kids were downright zapped by a series of Manitoba Public Insurance commercials aimed at getting the attention of young drivers. One of the commercials was a trilogy, with the first part running for a few months, the second part a few months later and the third part after that.

The first part showed a boyfriend and girlfriend at a party where the boyfriend has been drinking. When they leave, the girlfriend protests that the boyfriend shouldn’t drive but he insists. She sits in the passenger seat, and the boyfriend’s brother sits in the back. While en route, with the camera close up on them, the couple continues arguing. Then, in mid-sentence, the camera pulls back and shows the car being fiercely T-boned by a huge truck. End part one.

In part two, we learn the girl is struggling in rehab and is learning how to walk again. Commercial three shows the boyfriend attending the funeral of his brother and going to court for his drinking and driving charge.

While the acting was marginal, the effect was memorable.

“It was meant to hit them straight between the eyes and raise their eyebrows,” said Brian Smiley, MPI spokesman.

And it did.

So I think what Mark Stapleton is doing is great. Because I tell you something about working at a newspaper. If we hear there is an accident with injury on I-75, we cover it. And if there’s a motorcycle involved, we usually know how the story will read. Because as efficient as interstates are, if you’re unfortunate enough to get in an accident on one, good luck.

Accidents on I-75 are almost always bad. And if you have the audacity to ride the interstates without a helmet? Maybe you’d better consider a donation.

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